

## Assessing China's Intentions: Power, Uncertainty, and Subjectivity

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*Americans are increasingly assessing China as a revisionist power rather than as a status quo power. What makes them perceive that China has revisionist intentions? This is an important question given that both, jointly forming the Group of Two (G2), are great powers. This study argues that three factors contribute to Americans' negative assessment of China's intentions: increasing economic and military power, uncertainty over China's plans of actions, and Americans' subjective interpretation of China's military and nonmilitary actions. Regardless of China's true intentions, China's rapid increase in military and economic capabilities combined with high uncertainty about its intentions create the space for subjective interpretation of China's actions, which contributes to Americans' negative interpretation of China's behavior. The current tension between China and the United States over the South China Sea illustrates how the three variables contributes to Americans' increasingly negative assessment of China's intentions.*

**Keywords:** *power, intentions, uncertainty, subjectivity, signals.*

### INTRODUCTION

Americans are increasingly assessing China as a revisionist power rather than as a status quo power. Recent United States national security documents explicitly indicate China as a revisionist power, an assessment previous administrations have avoided articulating (The White House 2017; US Department of Defense 2018; 2019). For example, *the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, issued by the US Department of Defense on June 1, 2019, described the country as a “more confident and assertive China that is willing to accept friction in the pursuit of a more expansive set of political, economic, and security interests” (7).

What leads them to conclude that China has revisionist intentions? This is an important question given that both countries are two great powers in a league of their own, the Group of Two (G2). The question is more remarkable given that East Asia is increasingly becoming a central concern to the United States. At the 50th Munich Security Conference in 2014, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warned that regional tension in East Asia could be the next powder keg, similar to situations that arose in nineteenth-century Europe. At the heart of that tension is China's rise, which has sustained the country's ongoing disputes with US allies such as Taiwan, Japan (in the East China Sea), and the Philippines (in the South China Sea).

Those who regard information about state intentions as important tend to treat a state's intention as an inherent part of the country's nature and assume that scholars and policymakers can objectively assess a state's intentions (Schweller 1994; 1996; A. Kydd 1997; Danner and Martín 2019). Increasingly, however, more scholars are beginning to pay attention to the subjective perception of state intentions. According to these scholars, state intentions are in the eye of the beholder (Yarhi-Milo 2013; 2014; Kertzer 2016; Yarhi-Milo, Kertzer, and Renshon 2018). Many scholars, for example, have debated the Soviet Union's intentions as to whether it was a revisionist or purely a security seeker during the Cold War period, illustrating the absence of a clear criterion that can distinguish a benign state from an

aggressive one.

This study argues that Americans are likely to assess China's intentions as aggressive and this negative stance toward China will not change in the foreseeable future for three reasons: the threat posed by the increase in China's economic and military power, uncertainty regarding China's intentions, and Americans' subjective interpretation of China's military and non-military actions. First, China's growing military and economic capability encourage the country to be more assertive in disputes with other countries. China no longer shies away from raising its voice in disputes and the rise of China induces Americans to worry about China's potential as a regional hegemon in East Asia. China's power itself threatens the US, which in turn induces Americans to infer aggressive intentions out of fear. Second, uncertainty about China's plan of actions also leads Americans to be concerned about China's intentions. As Mearsheimer noted, the high uncertainty over China's intentions, combined with the rise of China, leads Americans to "assume the worst" about China's intentions. Third, uncertainty over a great power's intentions, combined with the absence of objective and clear criterion by which one can know a state's intentions, allows observers to subjectively interpret that state's actions. Because of the importance of security under anarchy, people tend to become cautious of a rival state's seemingly aggressive actions and sensitivity to negative information about a rival state's intentions leads to an action-reaction spiral. This negative spiral, in turn, encourages observers' overestimation of the negative aspect of a rival state's actions.

Examining how contemporary Americans view China's intentions, especially how they infer China's intentions from its actions or state signals, this paper's discussion of state signals includes China's military actions in the disputed South China Sea (2015–2016) and China's disengagement from the institutional dispute settlement process in its dispute with the Philippines.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the study of state intentions by exploring variables that affect a state's assessment of a rival state's intentions. This study also provides policy implications about China and warns policymakers that their judgment regarding China's intentions can be biased due to fear and uncertainty. Thus policymakers should be cautious in assessing China's intentions and when making foreign policy decisions regarding China, making sure to be aware of the bias that may prevent them from making rational decisions. In the rest of this paper, variables that affect Americans' assessment of China's intentions, namely (1) relative power, (2) uncertainty about China's intentions, and (3) American's subjective interpretation of China's actions, are discussed in order. Then, the role of each variable and related episodes in the case of the South China Sea are presented in more detail. Finally, the findings are summarized and the paper concludes.

## POWER, UNCERTAINTY, AND SUBJECTIVITY

Three variables (power, uncertainty, subjective interpretation), among others, affect Americans' assessment of China's intentions. First, power affects inference about intentions in two ways. On the one hand, a strong state makes people pay attention to the state's intentions (Kim 2016, 2020). According to Kim (2020)'s studies, when a rival state is weak, people do not regard information about a rival state's intentions as necessary. The public seems to ignore information about a weak state's intentions because a weak state does not significantly threaten their security. Only when a rival state is strong do observers come to

appreciate information about the state's intentions as necessary. Thus it is not surprising for American policymakers and scholars to become increasingly interested in China's intentions with the rise of China. On the other hand, observers may infer a strong state's intentions as somewhat aggressive because a strong state can impose its will, a freedom denied to weak states. Along this line, China is inevitably a revisionist state (Gertz 2002; Mearsheimer 2001). Mearsheimer has argued that "China cannot rise peacefully." Brzezinski also claimed that "if it [China] continues its dramatic economic growth ..., the United States and China are likely to engage in an intense security competition with considerable potential for war" (Brzezinski 2005). Similarly, Gertz (2002, 6) also attributed the source of China's threat to national power and military capabilities and rejected any optimism for the country's peaceful rise in the world.

Second, uncertainty over state intentions also influences the negative assessment of state intentions. Scholars diverge in their assessment of China's intentions. Structural realists believe that overcoming uncertainty is almost impossible, which again drives states to mistrust other states' intentions (Mearsheimer 2001b; Rosato 2015). Given the importance of the primary goal of states, survival, states should assume the worst about other states' intentions. Contrary to Mearsheimer, defensive realists such as Jervis, Glaser, and Kydd are more optimistic regarding certainty about state intentions. They contend that states can overcome uncertainty to some extent, such as by exchanging costly signals that can reveal their purely security-seeking motivations (Glaser 2010; Kydd 2005). This group of scholars is less pessimistic about China's growth (Gallagher 1994; Segal 1999; O'Hanlon 2000; Glaser 2011). Among them some believe that the United States still remains far stronger than China. Some believe that either deterrence based on nuclear weapons (mutually assured destruction-MAD) or the vast ocean between the two countries makes a Chinese attack on the US mainland unlikely. Meanwhile, liberals have maintained a more optimistic outlook regarding China's rise, largely in the belief that China's motives are more benign than realists perceive (Johnston 2003).

Recent findings at the micro-level reveal that people tend to assume the worst about a rival state's intentions when uncertainty about a rival state's intentions is high (Kim 2016, 2020). For example, Kim (2020) manipulated the level of uncertainty about a state's intentions in his experimental study and found that Americans tend to assess a hypothetical state's intentions as aggressive when information about the state's intentions is not available. His study suggests that an opaque Chinese government would tend to make other countries doubt China's intentions. The high level of uncertainty may leave China's leading strategic rival to infer aggressive intentions.

Third, Americans' subjective interpretation of China's actions or signals contributes to their negative interpretation of China's intentions. State signals, including military and non-military actions, can convey a state's intentions. Signaling theorists claimed that states could reveal their intentions through channels such as through military actions, domestic policy toward minorities, and institutional engagement (Jervis 1989; Kydd 1997, 2005; Weinberger 2003; Glaser 1997, 2010). According to such theorists, a peacefully motivated state can reveal its intentions by either sending costly signals or undertaking actions that incur a high cost that a deceptive state cannot mimic. For example, a security-seeking state may withdraw its troops from a disputed area to show its intentions not to invade the territory of the opposing state.

State signals, however, are not always effective in conveying a state's intentions. According to more recent scholarship, the lack of objective and clear criteria for finding

a state's true intentions through state signals often leads to the subjective interpretation of state actions. Scholars studying China's intentions as well have raised questions about the objectivity of state intentions. For example, Gries and Christensen (2001) argued that the debate over China's power and intentions "dangerously dismisses the role that other nations play in shaping Chinese behavior." Instead of attempting to objectively measure the threat posed by China's intentions, these scholars argued that "the 'truth' of such intentions is not an objective condition to be discovered" and that whether China is status quo or revisionist is partly determined by China's "interpretation of the motives behind American foreign policy" (Wick 2014). If China's intentions are peaceful and defensive, but the United States and its allies in East Asia do not perceive them as such, then China will be likely to face escalatory counteractions from the United States and its allies (Liff and Ikenberry 2014).

In the following sections, each of these variables—power, uncertainty, and subjective interpretation of state signals—will be explored as to what these variables are in the context of the rise of China and whether and how these variables affect Americans' assessment of China's intentions.

### 1.Power

China's increasing economic and military power contributes to Americans' negative assessment of China's intentions since its economic and military capability raises concerns about China's intentions. China's economy has grown rapidly in the 2000s. According to World Bank Data, China maintained a 9–14% annual GDP growth rate between 2002 and 2011, and it still maintained a GDP growth rate above 6% in 2018.<sup>1</sup> The average annual growth rate during the 2010s was 7.8% until 2018, driving China to become the second-largest economy globally. In 2018, China's GDP, measured in US dollars using nominal exchange rates, was \$13.6 trillion while that of the US was \$20.5 trillion.<sup>2</sup> When considering the actual purchasing power parity (PPP), China's GDP in terms of PPP had already surpassed that of the United States in 2014. China's GDP based on PPP increased to \$22.5 trillion in 2018, while the equivalent for the United States was \$18.2 trillion for that year. The size of China's economy relative to that of the US in PPP increased from about 36% in 2000 to about 124% in 2018, according to the World Bank. The gap in economic power between China and the United States has been rapidly decreasing to the point where China seems poised to overtake the US in economic size even in nominal terms in the near future. Recently, the International Monetary Fund projected that China would remain the world's largest economy in PPP terms over the next few decades.<sup>3</sup>

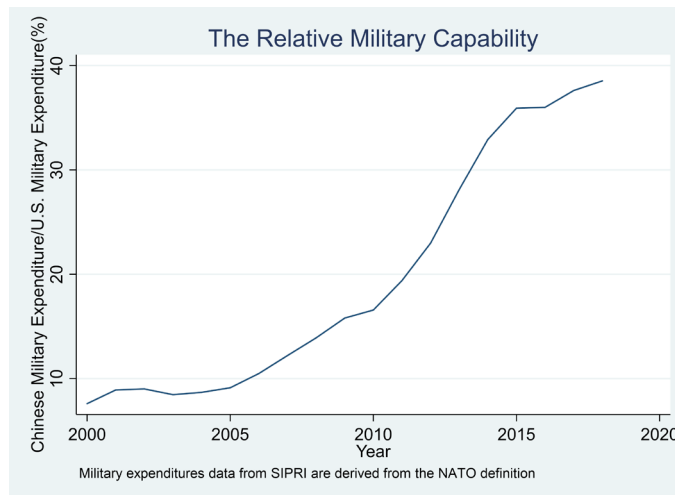
China has also been the largest trading partner with the United States since 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). US exports to China have been growing slowly, while US imports from China have been growing rapidly. As a result, the US trade deficit with China has been ballooning. The United States had a record deficit of USD 419.5 billion in 2018.<sup>4</sup> US exports of goods to China were USD 120.1 billion, while US imports of goods from China were USD 539.6 billion in that year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce 2019).

<sup>1</sup> World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files. Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gdp.mktp.kd.zg>.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [databank.worldbank.org/data](https://databank.worldbank.org/data).

<sup>3</sup> *International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook* (October 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Source: [census.gov/foreign-trade/balance.c5700.html](https://census.gov/foreign-trade/balance.c5700.html). Accessed on October 3, 2019.

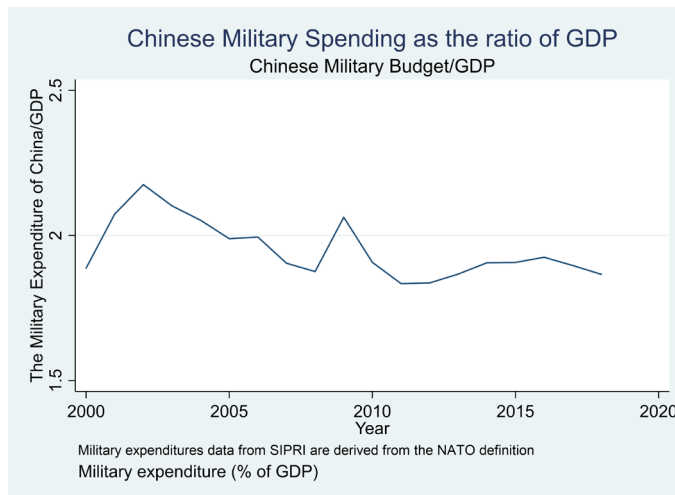
**Figure 1.** Chinese Military Spending as the ratio of U.S. Military Spending

The deficit with China is taking up an increasingly large proportion of the overall US trade deficit. According to the 2011 US-China Economic and Security Review Commission Report to Congress, China's share of this deficit rose from 22% in 2000 to 55% in 2010. The growing trade deficit with China contributes to the steadily accumulating foreign debt as well as unemployment in the manufacturing sector (Scott 2012). The Economic Policy Institute estimated that the trade deficit with China eliminated or displaced over 2.7 million US jobs between 2001 and 2011, and over 2.1 million (76.9%) of the jobs lost in total were from manufacturing sectors. The majority of the US public regards the US debt held by China, loss of jobs to China, and the trade deficit with China as severe problems for the United States. Because of these concerns over the rise of China, both the US ruling elite and the public view China as a competitor even though they may not identify China as an outright enemy (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and China Strategic Culture Promotion Association 2013).

China's increased military capability as well as its economic capability is also a key driver of the rising threat perception, whose defense budget is currently the second largest after the US (\$643.3 billion). China's 2018 defense budget was \$168.2 billion, followed by that of Saudi Arabia (\$82.9 billion), Russia (\$63.1 billion), India (\$57.9 billion) and the United Kingdom (\$56.1 billion) (The International Institute for Strategic Studies 2019). The relative size of China's military expenditure compared to that of the United States also increased from 9.6 % (2000) to 38.5% (2018), as seen in Figure 1. China's official military budget increased from \$23 billion in 2000 to \$250 billion in 2018, while that of the US increased from \$302 billion to \$649 billion during the same period.<sup>5</sup>

The increasing power of China to the extent that it challenges the hegemonic position of the United States contributes to the prevailing American perception that China is essentially a revisionist state. Some Chinese and American scholars, positing a more optimistic prospect

<sup>5</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)'s database: <http://sipri.org/databases/milex> (Accessed on October 3, 2019).

**Figure 2.** Chinese Military Spending as the ratio of GDP.

for the rise of China, argue that China will rise peacefully as the country has successfully adapted itself to the current western liberal order and has not invaded neighboring countries unlike Nazi Germany and imperial Japan (Huiyun 2009; Johnston 2003). However, the increase in power likely will not let China remain satisfied with the current status in the international community and will instead encourage China to raise its voice commensurate with its economic and military capability. The rise of China thus will make Americans uncomfortable, cautious, and suspicious of China's intentions. US policy makers and leaders no longer pretend to regard China as a strategic partner, but are more explicit in identifying China as a competitor (The White House 2017; US Department of Defense 2018; 2019).

The simple fact that China is economically and militarily strong does not have to lead to the inference that the country has revisionist ambitions. For example, even though the relative military capability of the two countries has been rapidly narrowing since the early 2000s, it does not necessarily indicate China's aggressive intention. In fact, China's military spending, as a ratio of GDP, has remained between 1.8 to 2.2 percent (see Figure 2 above). Some Chinese scholars called the situation that China faces as "the rise dilemma," which refers to "the dilemma a rising great power faces, as it seeks to maintain the growth in comprehensive capabilities and international influence, while simultaneously managing the increasing external security pressures generated by its growth" (Sun 2018, 101). The rise dilemma explains why even the relatively *benign* rise of China could cause the United States and its allies to be cautious of the rising power's intentions.

## 2. Uncertainty

As China has grown, US scholars and politicians have increasingly debated whether a rising China has revisionist intentions and whether it will rise peacefully or not (Glaser 2011; Mearsheimer 2014; Ikenberry 2008; Chestnut and Johnston 2009; Friedberg 2005; Roy 1996). Despite their efforts to accurately assess China's intentions, the question remains unanswered. Ultimately, this uncertainty over China's intentions contributes to Americans'



negative assessment of China's intentions (Rosato 2015a). There are at least three elements that contribute to creating this uncertainty.

First, the inconsistency between Chinese leaders' words and China's actions complicates facile assessment of China's intentions. China's senior political leaders repeatedly claim its peaceful intent. President Xi Jinping assured that a "prosperous and stable China will not be a threat to any country . . . it will only be a positive force for world peace." In a speech during a Chinese military parade in September 2015, Xi repeated the similar rhetoric, "No matter how much stronger it may become, China will never seek hegemony or expansion" (Rinehart 2016). However, the leader's rhetoric is often inconsistent with Chinese seemingly assertive actions such as the construction of military facilities on disputed islands, its claim of sovereignty over almost the entirety of the South China Sea, and its rejection to the right of foreign naval and air units to transit its Exclusive Economic Zones (Denmark 2011).

The inconsistency between words and deeds is found in China's often coercive economic policy, without officially acknowledging its economic sanctions (Lai 2018). In September 2010, China restricted exporting rare earth materials to Japan after the Japanese government arrested a Chinese captain and his crew because of a maritime collision involving a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard vessel near the disputed Diaoyudao/Senkaku islands. However, the Chinese government did not officially admit the restrictions on exports was due to the incident. Then-Prime Minister Wen Jibao said at a China-European Union meeting in 2010 that "China is not using rare earth as a bargaining chip... It is necessary to exercise management and control over the rare earth industry, but there won't be any embargo" (Lai 2018, 178).<sup>6</sup> The Chinese government also restricted banana imports from the Philippines because of the territorial dispute, highlighted by their mutual stand-off over the Scarborough Shoal in 2012. The speech by Aquino, the former president of the Philippines, illustrates his frustration over the uncertainty he felt over China's intentions: "At the end of the day, it goes from hot to cold, sometimes they're very conciliatory, sometimes they make very provocative statements . . . We will confess we don't understand some of the messages sometimes. We're not sure" (Lai 2018, 179).<sup>7</sup>

Second, more broadly, there has been no *credible* sign of reassurance from China from the perspectives of the United States and its allies. It does not mean that China has presented no sign of reassurance at all. In fact, China has often shown its willingness to contribute to global peace and has supported multilateral cooperation. For example, China is the third-largest contributor to the UN budget and one of the most significant contributors to the UN peacekeeping operations (Institute for Security & Development Policy 2018). China respects international norms and rules by engaging in international organizations and agreements regarding arms control and nonproliferation (Qingguo 2005). However, these actions do not seem to be viewed as sufficiently credible and persuasive to reassure US policy makers and the public. Instead, China's assertive posture in the East China Sea and in the South China Sea leaves Americans suspicious as to China's ultimate intentions.

Third, some concepts related to security remain opaque. For example, Chinese concepts such as "active defense" and "self-defense counter-attacks" often do not seem to be manifestly defensive. Chinese leaders tend to claim military preemption as a strategically defensive act (Denmark 2011). According to these leaders, China's intervention in the Korean War in 1950, and conflicts with India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969), and Vietnam

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<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times* (October 9, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> *The New York Times* (September 23, 2014)

(1979) are all described as self-defensive counter-attacks, even though arguably China often voluntarily became involved in the conflicts. In addition, China's opaque political system has also contributed to the ambiguity of China's intentions. A lack of civil rights, free media, opposition party, and its authoritarian political system prevents outsiders from clearly observing how China formulates its decisions.

This uncertainty over China's intentions elevates US concerns over the rise of China. For example, Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick, before the National Committee on US-China Relations in New York in September 2005, opined: "Uncertainties about how China will use its power will lead the United States—and others as well—to hedge relations with China. ... Many countries hope China will pursue a 'peaceful rise,' but none will bet their future on it".<sup>8</sup> To lessen such concerns prevalent in the US and elsewhere, China should reduce uncertainty regarding its intentions. China, Zoellick claimed, "should openly explain its defense spending, intentions, doctrine and military exercises to ease concerns about its rapid military buildup."<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Subjectivity

Uncertainty over intentions leaves room for US policy makers and the public to subjectively interpret China's actions. From the perspective of the United States, there are broadly two ways of interpreting China's seemingly revisionist actions. On the one hand, apparently assertive Chinese military and non-military actions may derive at least partly from China's aspiration to assume the role of regional hegemon in East Asia. On the other hand, escalating tensions between China and the United States may arise from unnecessary fear, as both could be argued to have defensive aspirations only. It is hard for a state to know other states' intentions because intentions, or plans of actions, are private information. States obviously do not want to reveal such sensitive information, given the importance of security under anarchy. One of the reasons for the difficulty of knowing a state's intentions correctly is the absence of *objective* and clear criteria by which a state's intentions can be accurately inferred from that state's actions. Due to the difficulty in objectively inferring a state's intentions, scholars have begun to emphasize the subjective interpretation of state signals by raising questions such as, "How does the signal-receiver select the 'right' signal among multiple signals and how is the signal interpreted?" (Yarhi-Milo 2013).

The subjective dimension of interpreting state signals tends to lead observers of state signals to interpret state actions negatively rather than positively, particularly when a state is not only strong but also a rival. First, people tend to infer a power's intentions as negative because of the knowledge about relative power one has (Axelrod 1973; Herrmann et al. 1997). Once people have prior knowledge or belief, they tend to interpret new information in alignment with the knowledge they already know. People fill information gaps (e.g., a state's intentions) with associated information (e.g., power, rivalry, etc.). Herrmann and his colleagues (1997) claimed that a perceived relationship is the function of perceived relative power, perceived culture, and perceived threat or opportunity. Thus, even just one piece of information evokes an image of a state while the missing information is filled in automatically by the perceiver when it is not provided. The rise of China in terms of military and economic capability has bestowed on China the status of rival of the United States.

<sup>8</sup> *Washington Post*, September 22, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*



The image of rival forms a schema regarding China and affects Americans' processing of information related to China. Therefore, once Americans observe China's power increasing to become comparable to that of the United States, they form an image or schema about China as a rival and the rival image induces Americans to infer aggressive motivations even when the information about the intentions is neutral.

Second, Americans may interpret China's actions more aggressively because of negativity bias people have even when the information about China's intentions reflect a rather neutral position. Negativity bias is "(t)he psychological phenomenon that people tend to attach greater weight to negative information than to equally extreme and equally likely positive information in a variety of information-processing tasks" (Aragones 1997, 189). Recently, some IR scholars found a psychological tendency of negativity bias in both elites and general public's foreign policy decisions (Johnson and Tierney 2019; Kim 2016, 2019). Because of these psychological tendencies, Americans may be more likely to weigh negative information about China's intentions (e.g., disputes in the South China Sea) more heavily than positive information (e.g., China's contribution to UN peacekeeping activities). Similarly, Chinese attempts to maintain its sovereignty, which Beijing asserts to be a domestic matter, is likely to be considered as credibly revealing China's aggressive intentions.

Americans' subjective interpretation of China's actions, together with uncertainty, and the rise of China facilitate the action-reaction spiral between China and the United States. US policy makers and scholars perhaps misread China's leadership, interpreting a series of China's seemingly assertive actions against US allies, such as the dispute with Japan in the East China Sea, as signs of China's belligerence rather than a reflection of China's fear and insecurity (Ross 2012). As a result, the United States has increased focus on the Asia-Pacific region by rebalancing its engagements, activities, and resources toward the region.<sup>10</sup> A 2012 Department of Defense (DOD) strategic guidance document and DOD report on the 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) reflected an increased emphasis on US military strategy in the Asia-Pacific region (O'Rourke 2015). In response, China has become increasingly wary of US intentions and, in response, more ardently developed anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities to disrupt US power projection into the western Pacific.<sup>11</sup> The A2/AD strategy relies on asymmetric weapons such as conventional ballistic missiles and stealthy submarines to prevent potentially hostile naval forces from operating near the Chinese coast. In turn, the United States has assumed a more aggressive military posture, both to protect its interests and to protect its allies in the region. For example, the Pentagon has designed a new operational concept, Air-Sea Battle, to maintain the capacity to project military power against China's anti-access area denial strategy (Kazianis 2014; Dian 2015). The rise of China, together with uncertainty about China's intentions, seems to persuade Americans to "assume the worst" about China's intentions and be prepared for competition.

Overall, the rise of China leaves US policy makers and the general public cautious and suspicious of China's intentions. They are particularly cautious because they are not certain about China's intentions. Some of China's actions appear to support multilateralism, global peace and stability, but other actions appear to be more threatening to the United States and

<sup>10</sup> For example, see "Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*. November 17, 2011. Source: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

<sup>11</sup> McCarthy, Christopher. Anti-Access/Area Denial: The Evolution of Modern Warfare. Source: <https://www.usnwc.edu/Lucent/OpenPdf.aspx?id=95>.

the western liberal order. This uncertainty makes Americans attentive to China's assertive actions, and this sensitivity to such actions fuels an action-reaction spiral in China-United States relations that tends to reinforce mutually suspicious beliefs each country has about each other.

China has become more confident and thus assertive in its stance in the South China Sea as it amasses strength, and US policy makers view this tendency as threatening both regional stability and its hegemonic status in the region. Even though the Chinese sincerely believe in its historic right to the South China Sea, Americans and neighboring countries in the region, including the Philippines, perceive China's intentions as revisionist and expansionary. This action-reaction spiral between China and the United States leads both to confirm that the other side is aggressive. The following case reveals this dynamic.

### THE CASE OF DISPUTE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

#### *The dispute between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea*

China's occupation of islands, reefs, and shoals in the South China Sea has caused conflicts between China and several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), including the Philippines. ASEAN appealed to relevant countries to "exercise restraint" and resolve disputes "without resort to force" in its Declaration on the South China Sea (Kumbaugh et al. 2001). In South China Sea issues, China has insisted on negotiating bilaterally with other claimant countries, believing that bilateral negotiation will be more advantageous than multilateral approaches. Accordingly, China has opposed third party intervention, including the US, and "internationalization" of the dispute. China's stance of rejecting mediation by any third party or under international law gives the impression that China wants to solve disputes by relying on its power rather than through earnest negotiation.

China and the Philippines have ongoing disputes over the Spratly Islands and Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea. Benigno S. Aquino III, the former president of the Philippines, criticized China's apparently expansionist ambitions in 2014. While appealing for external support against China's expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea, Aquino compared his country's threat in the face of China's claim over islands in the South China Sea to that of Czechoslovakia facing Hitler's demands for the Sudetenland in 1938.<sup>12</sup> Even Duterte's pro-China administration expressed its dismay over Chinese warships passing through waters south of the Philippines in July and August 2019. Philippine presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo, resorting to international law, exclaimed: "It's a violation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) since [the ships] passed through our exclusive economic zone."<sup>13</sup>

#### *China's Occupation of Islands in the South China Sea*

China's construction of port facilities, military structures, and an airstrip on the Spratly and other islands in the South China Sea has provided cause for concern for the US. Even though the islands are too small to support large military units, the islands would enable sustained Chinese air and sea patrols of the area.<sup>14</sup> This construction has also enabled China to increase its control over the South China Sea, which had been relatively out of reach until

<sup>12</sup> *The New York Times*. February 4, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> *The New York Times*. October 27, 2015.

then. Unsurprisingly, US policy makers have complained about the inconsistency between words and deeds regarding the militarization of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. US policy makers in the *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* (2019: 8) pointed out that Xi Jinping's words in the 2015 public pledge that "China does not intend to pursue militarization" of the Spratly Islands were not honored, given that anti-ship cruise missiles and long-range surface-to-air missiles were placed on the islands later in 2018. Thus, China's course of action was perceived by the US as a sign of revisionist ambitions. From Washington's perspective, China's construction challenged "the military status quo in the Western Pacific [existing] since the end of World War II, bringing China closer to its goal of establishing a security buffer extending far from its coast."<sup>15</sup> US policymakers were cautious regarding the increase of China's influence over the South China Sea due to concerns that China was resisting the US hegemonic status in the region. Harry B. Harris Jr., former Commander-in-Chief of the United States Pacific Command (CINCPAC) and current U.S. ambassador to South Korea, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2016 that China's actions were "changing the operational landscape in the South China Sea."<sup>16</sup>

China's assertive actions in the South China Sea generated a strong military reaction from the United States. The US Navy increased its deployment of warships to deny China's claim of sovereignty over most of the South China Sea. In October 2015, the United States sent the guided-missile destroyer USS Lassen to within 12 nautical miles of Subi Reef,<sup>17</sup> one of seven reefs in the Spratly Islands on which China has constructed artificial islands. The USS Lassen intentionally breached the 12-nautical-mile boundary around the island to express US non-recognition of China's sovereignty over the island.<sup>18</sup> Carter reiterated the US' right to free navigation in his testimony before a Senate panel in October 2015: "We will fly, sail and operate wherever international law permits and whenever our operational needs require." In response, Chinese military spokesmen Colonel Yang Yujin immediately denounced the deployment of the USS Lassen near Subi Reef as "an abuse of freedom of navigation."<sup>19</sup>

The United States subsequently responded to China's assertive actions in the area with a demonstration of resolve. In March 2016, it signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement with the Philippines, which allowed the United States to build facilities on five Philippine military bases and deploy conventional forces there, increasing American soldiers, planes, and ships across the country for at least ten years.<sup>20</sup> The presence of US forces near disputed areas in the South China Sea was intended to demonstrate US resolve to protect the freedom of navigation of international ships and buttress the Philippine military. Philippine leaders have emphasized the effect of increased US support. Senator Antonio F. Trillanes IV, chairman of the national defense and security committee in the Philippines, told the *New York Times*: "It will have some psychological effect on the Chinese, knowing that the Philippines won't be alone in this part of the world anymore."<sup>21</sup>

In a similar incident in May 2016, known as a freedom-of-navigation patrol, the US

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<sup>15</sup> *The New York Times*. March 8, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *The New York Times*. October 27, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *The New York Times*. April 12, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*. January 12, 2016.

deployed another guided-missile destroyer, the USS William P. Lawrence, near Fiery Cross Reef, another artificial island that China constructed on top of two small rocks.<sup>22</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kan criticized this US action, asserting that it “threatened China’s sovereignty and security interests, endangered the staff and facilities on the reef, and damaged regional peace and stability.”<sup>23</sup> In response to this series of US displays of determination to ensure freedom of navigation by deploying vessels to the South China Sea, two Chinese tactical fighters intercepted a US Navy (USN) reconnaissance aircraft over the South China Sea in May 2016.<sup>24</sup> When the USN Ep-3E Aries, a propeller-driven aircraft, was flying over the South China Sea, two Chinese J-11 jets came within roughly 50 feet of the US plane.<sup>25</sup> The US plane was forced to descend to avoid a collision. The Chinese movements were perceived as aggressive by American politicians rather than as deriving from China’s defensive motivations.

#### *Noncompliance with Institutional Rules*

The 2012 standoff between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal shows that a state’s engagement or disengagement in international institutions can be regarded as revealing that state’s intentions. The Philippines desired to solve the dispute peacefully by appealing to international organizations and international law, while China rejected international arbitration. The different approaches in settling disputes over territory could indeed reveal differences in the relevant stakeholders’ motivations: the one favoring resolution through multilateral talks and international law is signaling it is a benign state, while the one advocating bilateral resolutions while ignoring international law is appearing as an aggressive state. However, it also reflects the relative balance of power that made each country approach the dispute over Scarborough Shoal differently (De Castro 2015). China is incalculably more powerful than the Philippines economically and militarily. Thus, China did not want or need any arbitration from a third party, while the weaker Philippines preferred a more institutional and legalistic approach. Indeed, it seems hard to imagine a strong state favoring the intervention of third parties when the strong state’s power positions it at an advantage in bilateral negotiations. This was what China did to achieve its interests in the South China Sea while neighboring countries and the US considered the action as an indication of China’s revisionist ambition to expand its territory in the disputed region.

When tension between the two countries escalated, the Philippines brought the dispute before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). On January 23, 2013, the Philippines announced that it had initiated an arbitration case against China by issuing the requisite Notification and Statement of Claim under the dispute settlement provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS),<sup>26</sup> “a treaty regime to govern activities on, over, and under the world’s oceans” (O’Rourke 2015). UNCLOS offers “numerous means of peaceful settlement of maritime disputes, which include non-binding means between the disputing parties and binding means involving third parties

<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*, May 10, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> “Arbitration 101: Philippines v. China.” *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*.

such as arbitration and adjudication.”<sup>27</sup> On February 19, China rejected the Notification and Statement of Claim and returned it to the Philippines. However, China’s objection did not bar proceedings under Article 9 of UNCLOS Annex VII.

China has often insisted that it had no intention of resolving the dispute through international dispute resolution mechanisms. At Asia’s largest security conference, the Shangri-La Dialogue in June 2016, attended by defense ministers and experts from 25 countries, China reconfirmed that it would ignore any decision by an international arbitration panel regarding the Philippines’ lawsuit against Beijing’s territorial claim over virtually all of the South China Sea.<sup>28</sup> Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, director of the foreign affairs office of China’s National Defense Ministry, warned, “Because the territorial and sovereignty disputes have not been subjected to the arbitration, we think the arbitration is illegal... Therefore, we do not participate in it nor accept it.”<sup>29</sup> US Defense Secretary Ash Carter said at the conference that China risked erecting a “Great Wall of self-isolation” while urging Beijing to abide by international law and respect the outcome of the arbitration case at The Hague, whose ruling was expected within weeks.<sup>30</sup> However, Admiral Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of the Chinese military’s Joint Staff Department, rebuffed the accusation that Beijing risked isolating itself through its assertive behavior and maritime claims in the South China Sea. “We were not isolate(d) in the past, we are not isolated now, and we will not be isolated in the future...” China’s stance in the dispute in the South China Sea, however, only raised concerns about regional stability among US policy makers.

On July 12, 2016, after more than three years of proceedings, the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague rejected China’s claim to vast areas of the South China Sea within its self-proclaimed nine-dash line. There were two significant points in the ruling of the tribunal. The tribunal denied China’s claim to its “historic rights to resources in the waters within the nine-dash line when those waters are within the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of other coastal states.” It also determined that “none of the features in the Spratlys is entitled to a 200–nautical-mile EEZ.”<sup>31</sup> Paul Reichler, the Philippines’ chief counsel, hailed: “It’s an overwhelming victory” for the Philippines.<sup>32</sup> China ignored the ruling of the international court and built artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago. China’s refusal to comply with international law was again thought to have revealed China’s willingness to use its power to resolve conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

This study does not conclude whether the current tension between China and the United States came from a security dilemma or from China’s revisionist ambition. Instead, this study claims that the current Americans’ negative view over China’s intentions has come at least partly from a security dilemma. More specifically, this study reveals that Americans’

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> *The New York Times*. June 4, 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*. June 5, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Kuok, Lynn 2017, “Progress in the South China Sea? A Year After The Hague Ruling” *Foreign Affairs* online.

<sup>32</sup> *The New York Times*, July 12, 2016.

belief about China's intentions is intertwined with Chinese economic and military power, uncertainty over China's intentions, and Americans' subjective interpretation of China's actions. The rise of China and high uncertainty over China's intentions has made both US policy makers and general public pay special attention to China's seemingly assertive actions in some areas and led them to interpret acts as threatening to the current US hegemonic status in the region. For example, China's construction of military facilities on the islands in the South China Sea and its refusal to comply with international law are taken to signal its intention to dominate the region, thereby seemingly revealing China's revisionist ambitions. As China grows both economically and militarily, US policy makers and citizens will be more inclined to view China as a competitor, if not an outright threat. Once Americans internalize the perception that China is a competitor, they will likely fit new information about China's intentions into what they already believe about the state. Thus, consistent with the framework of a competitor, Americans will be likely to infer aggressive motivation from China's military and non-military actions even should China intend to increase its security without altering the status quo.

The study of China's actions shows how challenging it is to assess a state's intentions. This, however, does not mean that attempts to assess state intention are ultimately futile. Rather such attempts will have greater utility when we consider the three main variables this article has postulated in assessing intentions, and when the time frame for the analysis is narrow. For example, without considering the Soviet Union's intentions to improve relations with the United States at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the end of the Cold War might have been much slower. Future research should focus more on the interaction between intentions and other variables in the study of state intentions. Also, further study of how intentions dynamically change and what causes the variation in intentions will also be insightful. Exploring the origin and process of the variation in state intentions will explain the dynamic of international outcomes.

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